

Unit 1: What is the influence of the media in shaping cultural perceptions?

OPINION

Faking Cultural Literacy

By Karl Taro Greenfeld

May 24, 2014

LOS ANGELES — I CAN'T help it. Every few weeks, my wife mentions the latest book her book club is reading, and no matter what it is, whether I've read it or not, I offer an opinion of the work, based entirely on ... what, exactly? Often, these are books I've not even read a review or essay about, yet I freely hold forth on the grandiosity of Cheryl Strayed or the restrained sentimentality of Edwidge Danticat. These data motes are gleaned, apparently, from the ether — or, more realistically, from various social media feeds.

What was Solange Knowles's elevator attack on Jay-Z about? I didn't watch the security-camera video on TMZ — it would have taken too long — but I scrolled through enough chatter to know that Solange had scrubbed her Instagram feed of photos of her sister, Beyoncé. How about this season of "Game of Thrones" and that nonconsensual intercourse in the crypt? I don't watch the show, but I've scanned the recaps on Vulture.com, and I am prepared to argue that this was deeply offensive. Is Pope Francis a postmodern pontiff? I've never listened to one of his homilies nor watched his recent "60 Minutes" appearance, but I've seen plenty of his @Pontifex tweets retweeted, so I'm ready to say his position on inequality and social justice is remarkably progressive.

It's never been so easy to pretend to know so much without actually knowing anything. We pick topical, relevant bits from Facebook, Twitter or emailed news alerts, and then regurgitate them. Instead of watching "Mad Men" or the Super Bowl or the Oscars or a presidential debate, you can simply scroll through someone else's live-tweeting of it, or read the recaps the next day. Our cultural canon is becoming determined by whatever gets the most clicks.

In his 1987 book "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know," E. D. Hirsch Jr. listed 5,000 essential concepts and names — 1066, Babbitt, Pickwickian — that educated people should be familiar with. (Or at least that's what I believe he wrote, not having actually read the book.) Mr. Hirsch's book, along with its contemporary "The Closing of the American Mind" by Allan Bloom, made the point that cultural literacy — Mr. Bloom's canon — was the bedrock of our agreed-upon values.

What we all feel now is the constant pressure to know enough, at all times, lest we be revealed as culturally illiterate. So that we can survive an elevator pitch, a business meeting, a visit to the office kitchenette, a cocktail party, so that we can post, tweet, chat, comment, text as if we have seen, read, watched, listened. What matters to us, awash in petabytes of data, is not necessarily having actually consumed this content firsthand but simply knowing that it exists — and having a position on it, being able to engage in the chatter *about* it. We come perilously close to performing a pastiche of knowledgeability that is really a new model of know-nothingness.

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NPR's April Fools' Day web story "Why Doesn't America Read Anymore?" went viral on Facebook, where pranksters in on the joke linked to the piece and others then argued that they *do too* read and indignantly shared the link with exhortations to "read the story!" without actually clicking on it themselves to see that the only content was the

revelation that the whole thing was a prank: “We sometimes get the sense that some people are commenting on NPR stories that they haven’t actually read. If you are reading this, please like this post and do not comment on it. Then let’s see what people have to say about this ‘story.’ ”

According to a recent survey by the American Press Institute, nearly six in 10 Americans acknowledge that they do nothing more than read news headlines — and I know this only because I skimmed a Washington Post headline about the survey. After we’ve skimmed, we share. Commenters frequently start their posts with TL;DR — short for Too Long; Didn’t Read — and then proceed to offer an opinion on the subject at hand anyway. As Tony Haile, the chief executive of the web traffic analytics company Chartbeat, recently put it, “We’ve found effectively no correlation between social shares and people actually reading.” (He tweeted that.)



Jennifer Daniel

It’s not lying, exactly, when we nod knowingly at a cocktail party or over drinks when a colleague mentions a movie or book that we have not actually seen or read, nor even read a review of. There is a very good chance that our conversational partner may herself be simply repeating the mordant observations of someone in her timeline or feed. The entire in-person exchange is built from a few factoids netted in the course of a day’s scanning of iPhone apps. Who wants to be the Luddite who slows everything down by admitting he has never actually read a Malcolm Gladwell book and maybe doesn’t exactly understand what is meant by the term “Gladwellian” — though he occasionally uses it himself?

Whenever anyone, anywhere, mentions anything, we must pretend to know about it. Data has become our currency. (And in the case of Bitcoin, a classic example of something that we all talk about but nobody actually seems to understand, I mean that literally.)

Those of us in the business of gathering, dispensing and otherwise trafficking in information may be among the worst offenders. Recently I was on the phone with an editor who mentioned a piece by a prominent author. I claimed I had read the story. It was only later in the conversation that it became clear to me that the article had not yet been published and I could not possibly have read it. By then we had moved on to discussing a possible article on a California politician caught in a rather complicated scandal. Neither of us could come up with his first name. Did that prevent us from talking pseudo-knowledgably about the pros and cons of the potential story? Absolutely not.

It’s understandable that one party or even both parties in a conversation may have only the faintest idea of what is being talked about. We’re all very busy — busier, if I believe the harried responses (when there are any at all) to most emails I send, than any previous generation. And because we spend so much time staring at our phones and screens, texting and tweeting about how busy we are, we no longer have the time to consume any primary material. We rely instead on the casual observations of our “friends” or the people we “follow” or, well, who, actually?

Who decides what we know, what opinions we see, what ideas we are repurposing as our own observations? Algorithms, apparently, as Google, Facebook, Twitter and the rest of the social media postindustrial complex rely on these complicated mathematical tools to determine what we are actually reading and seeing and buying.

We have outsourced our opinions to this loop of data that will allow us to hold steady at a dinner party, though while you and I are ostensibly talking about “The Grand Budapest Hotel,” what we are actually doing, since neither of us has seen it, is comparing social media feeds. Does anyone anywhere ever admit that he or she is completely lost in the conversation? No. We nod and say, “I’ve heard the name,” or “It sounds very familiar,” which usually means we are totally unfamiliar with the subject at hand.

THERE was a time when we knew where we were getting our ideas. In my eighth grade English class, we were assigned “A Tale of Two Cities,” and lest we enjoy the novel, we were instructed to read Charles Dickens’s classic with an eye toward tracking the symbolism in the text. One afternoon while I was in the library, struggling to find symbols, I ran into a few of my classmates, who removed from their pockets folded yellow and black pamphlets that read “Cliffs Notes” and beneath that the title of Dickens’s novel in block letters. That “study guide” was a revelation.

Here were the plot, the characters, even the symbols, all laid out in paragraphs and bullet points. I read the Cliffs Notes in one night, and wrote my B paper without finishing the novel. The lesson was not to immerse and get lost in the actual cultural document itself but to mine it for any valuable ore and minerals — data, factoids, *what you need to know* — and then trade them on the open market.

With the advent of each new technology — movable type, radio, television, the Internet — there have been laments that the end is nigh for illuminated manuscripts, for books, magazines and newspapers. What is different now is the ubiquity of the technology that is replacing every old medium.

The information is everywhere, a constant feed in our hands, in our pockets, on our desktops, our cars, even in the cloud. The data stream can’t be shut off. It pours into our lives a rising tide of words, facts, jokes, GIFs, gossip and commentary that threatens to drown us. Perhaps it is this fear of submersion that is behind this insistence that we’ve seen, we’ve read, we *know*. It’s a none-too-convincing assertion that we are still afloat. So here we are, desperately paddling, making observations about pop culture memes, because to admit that we’ve fallen behind, that we don’t know what anyone is talking about, that we have nothing to say about each passing blip on the screen, is to be dead.

A journalist and the author of the forthcoming novel “SubPrime.”

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

We Don't Have to Give In to the Smartphones

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By Jonathan Haidt, Will Johnson and Zach Rausch

Dr. Haidt is a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business. Mr. Johnson is the chief executive of the Harris Poll. Mr. Rausch is a senior research scientist at the Stern School.

June 18, 2025

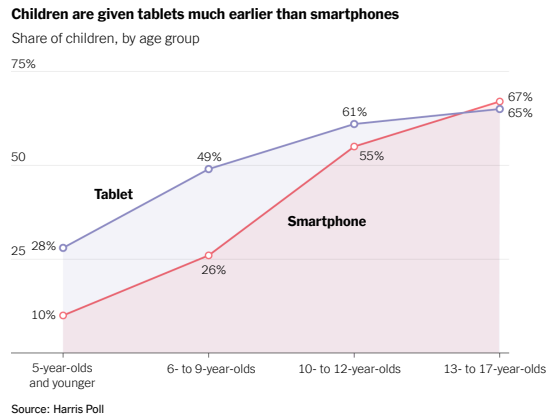
Since the dawn of the television age, parents have struggled to limit or guide their children's screen time.

But with the arrival of smartphones that can — and do — go everywhere and with social media apps that teenagers now use for an average of five hours every day, many parents feel a sense of resignation. The struggle has been lost. Parents who try to delay giving a smartphone until high school or social media until 16 know that they'll face the plaintive cry from their children: “But I'm the only one!”

To better understand the tensions over technology playing out in American families, we worked with the Harris Poll to conduct two surveys. As we reported last year, our survey of 1,006 members of Gen Z found that many young people feel trapped — tethered to digital products like TikTok and Snapchat. Nearly half of all participants expressed regret about having access to many of the most popular social media platforms.

Here we present the second part of our investigation: a nationally representative survey of 1,013 parents who have children under 18. The overall picture isn't any better. We find widespread feelings of entrapment and regret. Many parents gave their children smartphones and social media access early in their lives — yet many wish that social media had never been invented, and overwhelmingly they support new social norms and policies that would protect kids from online harms.

In our survey, 55 percent report that their children began to use a smartphone as a primary user by the age of 12, and 61 percent say the same for a tablet.



Over the last 15 years, as children began to receive these devices at ever younger ages, social media access followed inexorably — despite the legal minimum age of 13 for companies to collect data from children without parental consent. Among children who currently use Instagram, half were doing so by the age of 13, and the same figure holds for Snapchat. For TikTok, it was slightly higher at 57 percent. (Those numbers come from the parents. Of course, many children created accounts earlier without their parents' knowledge.)

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Almost a third of parents whose children have social media believe they gave their child access to social media too young, and 22 percent feel similarly for smartphones. Notably, for both technologies, only 1 percent of parents thought they had waited too long to introduce them. In other words, parents regret the technologies they gave, not the technologies they withheld.

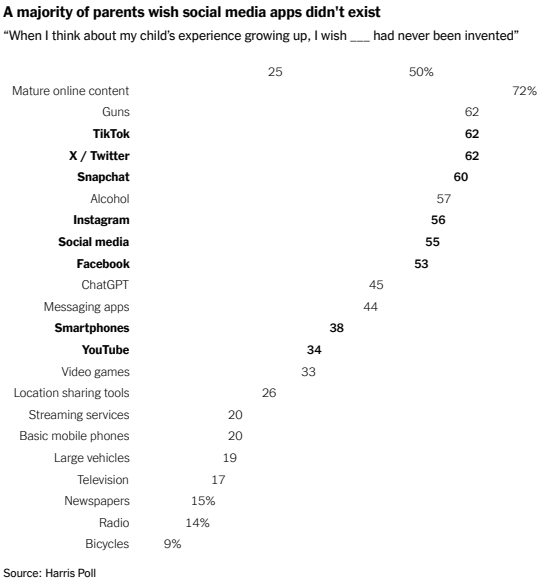
Why did so many parents make decisions that they regret? One major reason is that in the brief period when flip phones and other basic phones were replaced by smartphones, roughly from 2010 to 2015, there was a pervasive sense of techno-optimism. Most people were amazed by the new technology and its beneficial applications — from the mundane like hailing a car service to the profound like bringing down a dictatorship.

A common belief at the time was that being a so-called digital native would give children an advantage in the new world taking shape around us. It was only in the late 2010s that a deep unease began to arise as it became increasingly clear that children who grew up with smartphones and social media were not better adapted. In fact, they were becoming more anxious, depressed, isolated, sedentary and unable to focus.

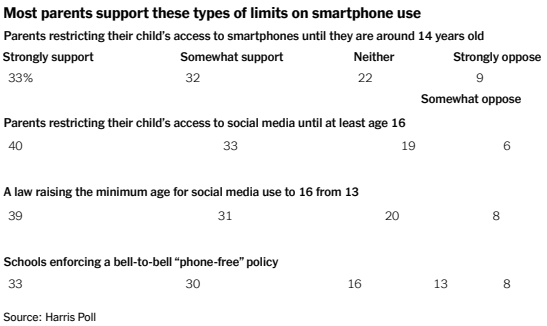
There was an additional reason for those regretted decisions: social pressure. More than one third of parents (39 percent) who had given their child a smartphone said that they would have preferred to wait but they felt they had to give in because so many of their children's friends already had one. For social media, the social pressure was even stronger: 54 percent of those who let their child have access to social media said they felt they had to because so many other families had already done so.

The digital regret shows up most clearly in a set of questions we asked about a variety of consumer products. The exact question was “When I think about my child’s experience growing up, I wish ____ had never been invented.” As the accompanying chart shows, parents have very little regret about giving bicycles to their children, even though many of their children presumably got hurt while biking at some point. In contrast, most parents perceive alcohol, guns and pornography as bad things, at least in the context of their children’s development. So what about the technologies that dominate children’s lives today? Are they closer to bicycles or to alcohol?

For smartphones and for YouTube, they are midway between. Around a third of parents regret their existence, but most don’t. In contrast, a majority of parents wish that social media in general, and Facebook and Instagram in particular, had never been invented. For X and TikTok, the percentage was 62 percent, which was higher than for alcohol and equal to guns.



It turns out that Gen Z has at least as much regret about the role that technology played in their childhoods. In our previous survey we found that 30 percent of adult Gen Z-ers agreed with the statement “I had access to smartphones too early in my life” and 34 percent said the same for social media. Forty-five percent also agreed that if or when they have children, they will not allow them to have smartphones before high school.



We have proposed four norms intended to help free families from the collective action trap — the feeling that they have to give in because everyone else has done so. It’s hard for any one parent or school to act alone. But when families and schools act together, change becomes possible. These norms are meant to reinforce one another, and when combined, they offer a road map for reclaiming a healthier and more joyful childhood.

The first norm is to delay smartphones until high school. Our survey found that two-thirds of parents said they would prefer to wait until at least age 14. The second is to delay social media until age 16 — a goal supported by 73 percent of parents, with 70 percent backing a legal age minimum of 16.

The third norm is phone-free schools, where students are separated from devices from the first bell to the last, including lunch and recess; 63 percent of parents support this policy. Finally, the fourth norm is about giving kids something better to do: more independence, free play and responsibility in the real world. Forty percent of parents with children aged 6 to 12 years said they want to give their kids more freedom to be out with peers unsupervised. Among parents of teenagers, that number rises to 47 percent.

These strong levels of support cross racial, economic and political lines. And the good news is that many parents are legislators, teachers and school superintendents, and they are actively promoting these ideas. Ten states have already enacted laws making their schools phone-free. Less strict laws on phone use in schools have been enacted in 21 states, and phone-restriction laws are under consideration in 14 more states and the District of Columbia.

This is happening outside the United States, too. Every school in Brazil has gone phone-free bell-to-bell. Australia has raised the age for opening social media accounts to 16; other countries are quite likely to follow suit. The president of France, Emmanuel Macron, recently announced his intention to enact a minimum age of 15 for social media use in France if the European Union does not enact a similar restriction first.

With tech companies eagerly filling our children’s lives — and their classrooms — with more new and untested technologies (A.I. “friends,” tutors and other forms of virtual reality), it is becoming that much more urgent for parents to speak up and for legislators to act.

The goal of these reforms isn’t just to limit screens. It’s much bigger than that. The goal is to restore childhood.

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GUEST ESSAY

The Era of A.I. Propaganda Has Arrived, and America Must Act

Aug. 5, 2025

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By Brett J. Goldstein and Brett V. Benson

Mr. Goldstein and Mr. Benson are professors at Vanderbilt University who specialize in national and international security.

Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections were pretty low-tech. Relying on generic bot messaging, low-quality content and mass targeting, their operations probably had limited impact.

Those days are over. With the exponential rise of generative A.I. systems, the greatest danger is no longer a flood of invective and falsehoods on social media. Rather, it is the slow, subtle and corrosive manipulation of online communication — propaganda designed not to shock, but to slip silently into our everyday digital discussions. We have entered a new era in international influence operations, where A.I.-generated narratives shift the political landscape without drawing attention.

A Chinese company called GoLaxy is already undertaking such operations, according to a large cache of documents recently uncovered by the Vanderbilt University Institute of National Security, where we work. The materials show GoLaxy emerging as a leader in technologically advanced, state-aligned influence campaigns, which deploy humanlike bot networks and psychological profiling to target individuals. Its activities and claims suggest it has connections to the Chinese government.

GoLaxy has already deployed its technology in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the documents suggest it may be preparing to expand into the United States. A.I.-driven propaganda is no longer a hypothetical future threat. It is operational, sophisticated and already reshaping how public opinion can be manipulated on a large scale.

A representative of GoLaxy said the company focused on services for business intelligence and denied it had developed a bot network or psychological profiling tools targeting individuals. The company also denied being under the authority of any government agency or organization.

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What sets GoLaxy apart is its integration of generative A.I. with enormous troves of personal data. Its systems continually mine social media platforms to build dynamic psychological profiles. Its content is customized to a person's values, beliefs, emotional tendencies and vulnerabilities. According to the documents, A.I. personas can then engage users in what appears to be a conversation — content that feels authentic, adapts in real-time and avoids detection. The result is a highly efficient propaganda engine that's designed to be nearly indistinguishable from legitimate online interaction, delivered instantaneously at a scale never before achieved.

While the documents offered no specific examples of these conversations, they describe how the technology develops personalized content. By extracting user data and studying broader patterns, A.I. can build synthetic messaging designed to appeal to a wide spectrum of the public. It can adapt to a user's tone, values, habits and interests, according to the documents. Then it can mimic real users by liking posts, leaving comments and pushing targeted content.

According to the documents we uncovered, GoLaxy used its technology to minimize opposition to a 2020 national security law that cracked down on political dissent, identifying thousands of participants and thought leaders from 180,000 Hong Kong Twitter accounts. Then GoLaxy went after what it perceived as lies and misconceptions, "correcting" the sources via its army of fake profiles.

The company struck again in the lead-up to the 2024 Taiwanese election, when China-aligned groups peddled false claims of corruption and posted deepfakes on social media. During the campaign, GoLaxy suggested ways to undermine Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party, which opposes China's claims over the island. The company gathered and most likely supplied information on trends in Taiwanese political debate and recommended the deployment of bot networks to exploit political divisions between its parties. GoLaxy had already amassed an abundance of data on Taiwan to support such intrusions, according to the documents, including organizational maps of government institutions — down to their political tendencies, attitude toward China and GPS coordinates — and profiles of over 5,000 accounts belonging to Taiwanese people.

In a written statement, GoLaxy denied providing technical support for activities in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

So far, GoLaxy's active deployments appear to have been confined to the Indo-Pacific. Evidence in the documents suggests that the company is positioning itself for expanded operations, including in the United States. GoLaxy has assembled data profiles of at least 117 members of the U.S. Congress and over 2,000 American political figures and thought leaders. Assuming GoLaxy continues to build American dossiers, it is possible the company will bring its operations across the Pacific. It said it has not collected data targeting U.S. officials.

GoLaxy operates in close alignment with China's national security priorities, although no formal government control has been publicly confirmed. The company was founded in 2010 by a research institute at the state-controlled Chinese Academy of Sciences, and has been chaired by a deputy director from the same institute. Since then, GoLaxy has, according to the documents, worked with top-level intelligence, party and military bodies, suggesting integration with China's political system.

GoLaxy's strategic alignment became clearer in 2021, when it received funding from Sugon, a Beijing-based supercomputing company flagged by the Pentagon as a Chinese military affiliate. GoLaxy's public-facing A.I. platform coordinates with Sugon's supercomputers and DeepSeek-R1, one of China's leading A.I. models.

These connections are a reminder that influence operations are no longer a sideshow — they are becoming core instruments of statecraft. Battlefields include not only geographic territory with troops and ships but also the online platforms we use every day.

The strategy deployed by GoLaxy and others weaponizes the openness that underpins democratic societies. Debate, transparency and pluralism — hallmarks of democratic strength — are also points of vulnerability. Technological tools like GoLaxy's exploit these qualities. The line between surveillance and persuasion is disappearing, fast.

The danger lies in the stealth and scale of these methods, and the speed with which they are improving. A.I.-generated content can be deployed quietly across entire populations with minimal resistance. It operates continually, shaping opinion and corroding democratic institutions beneath the surface. Imagine today's most effective social media platforms, but on a far greater scale, using a far more comprehensive model of its targets and synthetic propaganda that is even more compelling and difficult to resist.

To counter the growing threat of A.I.-driven foreign influence operations, a coordinated response is essential. Academic researchers must work urgently to map how artificial intelligence, open-source intelligence and online influence campaigns converge to serve hostile state objectives. The U.S. government must take the lead in disrupting the infrastructure behind these operations, with the Defense Department targeting foreign influence networks and the Federal Bureau of Investigation working closely with digital platforms to identify and counter false personas. The private sector needs to accelerate A.I. detection capabilities to bolster our ability to detect synthetic content. If we can't identify it, we can't stop it.

We are entering a new era of gray-zone conflict — one marked by information warfare executed at a scale, speed and degree of sophistication never seen before. If we don't quickly figure out how to defend against this kind of A.I.-driven influence, we will be completely exposed.

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GUEST ESSAY

Charisma Rules the World

June 16, 2025

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By Molly Worthen

Dr. Worthen, a historian at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is the author of “Spellbound: How Charisma Shaped American History From the Puritans to Donald Trump.”

The 2020s should have been the decade when American politics began to make sense. The multibillion-dollar industry of public opinion polling can turn vibe shifts into tweetable bar graphs and trend lines. Surveys have found that affiliation with traditional religious institutions has mostly declined over the past generation, so one might conclude that more Americans now form their worldviews and choose leaders based on cool logic and material interest. And over this data-driven landscape extends the lengthening shadow of our artificial intelligence overlords, who promise to rationalize more and more of our lives, for our own good.

Yet somehow, despite the experts’ interactive graphics and the tricks that large language models can do, it has only gotten harder to understand the worldviews and political choices of half the country (whichever half you don’t belong to). Perhaps, then, we should pay more attention to the human quirks that confound statisticians and that A.I. can’t quite crack — desires and drives that have not changed much over the centuries. That means rescuing a familiar word from decades of confusion and cliché: charisma.

In New Testament Greek, the word means gift of grace or supernatural power. But when we use it to describe the appeal of a politician, a preacher’s hold over his congregation or a YouTube guru with a surprisingly large following, we are taking a cue from the sociologist Max Weber. He spent much of his career studying what happens to spiritual impulses as a society becomes more secular and bureaucratic.

A little more than a century ago, he borrowed “charisma” from the Bible and Christian history to describe the relationship between leaders and followers in both religion and politics. Charisma, he wrote, is a form of authority that does not depend on institutional office, military might or claims on tradition. Instead, charisma derives from followers’ belief that their leader possesses a supernatural mission and power: “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men.”

Weber described himself as “religiously unmusical” and insisted that he was reinventing charisma in a “completely value-neutral sense.” But the magnetism that he observed in some leaders — and their followers’ sense of calling and duty — seemed to demand a spiritual description. The secular vocabulary developing in his corner of academia, the new disciplines of the social sciences, was not up to the task. “In order to do justice to their mission, the holders of charisma, the master as well as his disciples and followers, must stand outside the ties of this world,” he wrote.

Even as he resisted his colleagues’ tendencies to reduce human behavior to animal instincts and reflexes, Weber missed a key element. Charisma is not something that leaders have; it’s something that they do. Charisma is a kind of storytelling. It’s an ability to invite followers into a transcendent narrative about what their lives mean.

Charisma is not the same thing as charm or celebrity. Americans have mixed up these concepts since the 1950s and ’60s, when Weber’s idea leached into newspaper election coverage and everyday speech. When I began working on a book about charismatic leaders throughout American history, I was in this muddle myself. I confused charisma with charm: a person’s ability to engage you in conversation and make you feel like the center of attention.

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But winning elections, beginning a mass movement or starting a religion requires more than a knack for working a room. Charm, it turns out, is not even a uniquely human quality. The latest intelligent social agent chatbots like Replika have better social skills than many humans. Rob Brooks, an evolutionary biologist who set out recently to test A.I.’s ability to play on our social instincts, wrote that his Replika chatbot always wants to hear about his day, asks great follow-up questions and “really gets me.”

Anyone who has read or heard about Dale Carnegie’s “How to Win Friends and Influence People” knows that charm follows a formula (mainly, offer specific praise and focus on the other person’s problems rather than your own concerns). A.I. agents run these scripts better than we can. They “are really good at making you feel seen,” Dr. Brooks, who works at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, told me. With each generation of innovation, A.I. gets better at manipulating human “algorithms”: the impulses that we share with our fellow primates, especially our desire to like and be liked, just as chimpanzees groom one another to strengthen social bonds.

But charisma may remain one of the few human dynamics that elude A.I., because it is not the conversational allogrooming at which A.I. excels. It is based not on primate instincts of attraction but on our aspirations to higher meaning, enlivened with a dose of the social friction that A.I. agents are designed to eliminate. Charisma can be just as repellent as it is attractive, so it usually baffles or disgusts anyone not under its thrall.

My research took me from Puritan mystics and early Mormons to Black nationalism and Pentecostal revivals to the cults and management gurus of the 1970s and ’80s, all the way to President Trump. Some of these figures possessed good looks, great oratorical skills, sex appeal or charm — but surprisingly few, as far as I could tell.

They had something far more important in common: They promised to pull back the veil on secret truth. They revealed how followers’ struggles have a purpose — one that the reigning elites and institutions belittled or missed entirely. In the 1630s, the Puritan midwife-theologian Anne Hutchinson recruited most of the Boston congregation with her promise that her fellow colonists could learn directly from scripture and the Holy Spirit that they were saved.

That divine assurance, she said, meant that they should not meekly accept everything their ministers taught. “I’ll bring you to a woman that preaches better Gospel than any of your black-coats that have been at the ninniversity,” one of her followers declared. When clergy and magistrates banished her from Massachusetts Bay in 1638, they might have expelled the heretic, but they couldn’t extinguish her idea’s core appeal: Americans’ hunger for a role in a cosmic story that turned their private anxieties into assurance that a higher power would, one day, remedy their worldly miseries and justify their suffering.

If leaders can tell stories like this, then they don't need gravitas or charm. In fact their oratory and personal presence can — and almost certainly will — provoke mixed reviews. In the 1840s, one skeptic who met Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, described him as “a coarse, plebeian, sensual person in aspect, and his countenance exhibits a curious mixture of the knave and the clown. His hands are large and fat.”

Yet converts found an answer to their frustrations with traditional Christianity and personal dead ends in Smith's story about the gold plates, his revelation of the young Republic's central role in God's plan and the divine mandate to build a new Zion. For them, just shaking his hand brought “the Holy Spirit in such great abundance that I felt it thrill my whole system, from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet,” one convert wrote.

These polarized reactions — based on whether the leader offers you a heroic role in his narrative, casts you as a villain or leaves you out entirely — are the real mark of charisma. For all the research on the importance of body language, whether we find a speaker bewitching or irritating depends on our relationship to the person's message. Mr. Trump's speeches strike his supporters as authentic truth telling in an era of fake news, while his critics struggle to understand how anyone has patience for his stream-of-consciousness rambling. “Some people would look at Trump and think, ‘That's ludicrous. That's not meaningful,’” Cody Kommers, a researcher at the Alan Turing Institute in London, told me. “But clearly for a lot of people, there is meaning being generated there, some sort of narrative that people are tapping into.”

Narratives usually follow patterns. In recent years, scholars have used software to analyze thousands of books and chart the basic emotional arcs of classic literature, ranging from the Icarus narrative of rise and fall to the triumphal Cinderella plot. Psychologists have found that when they interview people about their life stories with a series of questions based on the so-called hero's journey — a narrative structure present in myths across cultures — they are more likely to find significance in the twists and turns of their own lives. Dr. Kommers and his colleagues have tried the same thing with large language models, or L.L.M.s. “We give them a character profile, give them the hero's journey and have them tell the story again. The question is, can L.L.M.s show the same effects of restorying? Yes, they can.”

But charismatic leaders do far more than reproduce generic plot structures or parrot the stages of Joseph Campbell's “Hero With a Thousand Faces.” They tell a strange story that speaks to the anxieties of their moment in history, not a formulaic one that could suit any time or place. They possess an uncanny intuition to zigzag when everyone else is heading straight.

Marcus Garvey supercharged the tradition of Black nationalism by reinventing — even breaking — older models of Black leadership. He arrived in New York City during World War I and honed a flair for pageantry that spoke to African American society of that place and time: full of veterans angry that the promises of Western democracy did not fully apply to them and members of Black fraternal orders who had found the dignity they deserved in uniforms and rituals.

At a time when most attention focused on Black leaders who were fair skinned and college educated, he cut a different figure. His archenemy, W.E.B. Du Bois, described Garvey as “a little fat black man” and a “demagogue.” But Du Bois belonged to the Black elite; Garvey's working-class followers saw him through the empowering story he told. “If 400,000,000 Negroes can only get to know themselves, to know that in them is a sovereign power, is an authority that is absolute, then in the next 24 hours we would have a new race, we would have a new nation, an empire,” he preached.

Smartly dressed legions of his Universal Negro Improvement Association paraded behind their leader, who often wore a plumed helmet and purple, green and gold robes. Garvey's vision for Pan-African economic, political and spiritual power was a remix of old and new archetypes: part Carnegie, part Napoleon, part Moses. Those who joined the association found themselves in three roles at once. They were self-made men and women, conquering soldiers and chosen people claiming a divine inheritance.

Charisma has no inherent moral valence. It can empower freedom fighters or enable tyrants. But in a healthy society, other authorities counterbalance the new picture of reality that a charismatic leader claims to reveal. Universities and government institutions staffed with experts, religious and philosophical traditions that place current events in a longer context, established media with professional journalists and international news bureaus — all these help ordinary people evaluate the story a leader is telling. But for more than a generation, study after study has documented the collapse of public trust in these institutions.

Our current moment encourages the impulse to retreat to your phone and ask a chatbot to help you sort out the world. It also invites a charismatic leader who can rework classic American story lines and answer the frustrations of people alienated from the invisible experts, confusing rules, profit motives and organizational inertia sometimes just called “the system.” (Weber described our modern condition as an “iron cage.”)

Mr. Trump began crafting a story to explain all this long before he formally entered politics. Since the 1980s, he has cast himself as the hero-entrepreneur who built an empire by working the system and the populist avenger who will vindicate the little guy. “I do get tired of seeing the country ripped off,” he told Oprah Winfrey in 1988, when she asked him whether he had considered running for president. “If it got so bad, I would never want to rule it out totally.”

Mr. Trump is the bard of the burn-it-down age. His mix of national and personal mythology fuses political strategy with his gut reactions. The more those reactions horrify his critics, the more his most committed supporters adore him, because you don't have to be likable to be charismatic. Likability can be an impediment if you're crusading to break through the polite lies of mainstream politics.

Let's be clear about the human strangeness and genius of this. No machine programmed to spew out tropes according to statistical frequency could reproduce the components of Mr. Trump's charisma or the appeal of Hutchinson, Smith and Garvey before him. Mr. Trump's abrasive personal style and love of chaos are the opposite of a Replika chatbot's soothing, frictionless responses. Yet both appeal in our secular, disconnected age, when many Americans choose to sit alone scrolling TikTok conspiracy theories instead of joining live human beings in a church, school board meeting, bowling league, Scout troop or any of the other depopulated relics of an earlier, more connected time.

In our hyperindividualized age, a lot of us are searching for a storyteller: someone or something to tell us what our lives mean. Compared with the sense of purpose and identity that past generations found in sturdy communities, now “it's very difficult to tell the story of who you are and what you're doing,” Dr. Kommers said. “Psychology and A.I. don't have a way to help us with that. That's one of the reasons there's this pervasive feeling that technology doesn't make our lives better.”

Americans are still waiting for a leader who invites us into a plotline that moves beyond 2025. We need a story that reckons with reality, but does not trap us in it.

Molly Worthen, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is the author, most recently, of “Spellbound: How Charisma Shaped American History From the Puritans to Donald Trump.”

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GUEST ESSAY

Thinking Is Becoming a Luxury Good

July 28, 2025

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By Mary Harrington

Ms. Harrington is a journalist based in Britain.

When I was a kid in the 1980s, my parents sent me to a Waldorf school in England. At the time, the school discouraged parents from allowing their kids to watch too much TV, instead telling them to emphasize reading, hands-on learning and outdoor play.

I chafed at the stricture then. But perhaps they were on to something: Today I don't watch much TV and I still read a lot. Since my school days, however, a far more insidious and enticing form of tech has taken hold: the internet, especially via smartphones. These days I know I have to put my phone in a drawer or in another room if I need to concentrate for more than a few minutes.

Since so-called intelligence tests were invented around a century ago, until recently, international I.Q. scores climbed steadily in a phenomenon known as the Flynn effect. But there is evidence that our ability to apply that brain power is decreasing. According to a recent report, adult literacy scores leveled off and began to decline across a majority of O.E.C.D. countries in the past decade, with some of the sharpest declines visible among the poorest. Kids also show declining literacy.

Writing in The Financial Times, John Burn-Murdoch links this to the rise of a post-literate culture in which we consume most of our media through smartphones, eschewing dense text in favor of images and short-form video. Other research has associated smartphone use with A.D.H.D. symptoms in adolescents, and a quarter of surveyed American adults now suspect they may have the condition. School and college teachers assign fewer full books to their students, in part because they are unable to complete them. Nearly half of Americans read zero books in 2023.

The idea that technology is altering our capacity not just to concentrate but also to read and to reason is catching on. The conversation no one is ready for, though, is how this may be creating yet another form of inequality.

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Think of this by comparison with patterns of junk food consumption: As ultraprocessed snacks have grown more available and inventively addictive, developed societies have seen a gulf emerge between those with the social and economic resources to sustain a healthy lifestyle and those more vulnerable to the obesogenic food culture. This bifurcation is strongly class-inflected: Across the developed West, obesity has become strongly correlated with poverty. I fear that so, too, will be the tide of post-literacy.

Long-form literacy is not innate but learned, sometimes laboriously. As Maryanne Wolf, a literacy scholar, has illustrated, acquiring and perfecting a capacity for long-form “expert reading” is literally mind-altering. It rewires our brains, increasing vocabulary, shifting brain activity toward the analytic left hemisphere and honing our capacity for concentration, linear reasoning and deep thought. The presence of these traits at scale contributed to the emergence of free speech, modern science and liberal democracy, among other things.

The habits of thought formed by digital reading are very different. As Cal Newport, a productivity expert, shows in his 2016 book, “Deep Work,” the digital environment is optimized for distraction, as various systems compete for our attention with notifications and other demands. Social media platforms are designed to be addictive, and the sheer volume of material incentivizes intense cognitive “bites” of discourse calibrated for maximum compulsiveness over nuance or thoughtful reasoning. The resulting patterns of content consumption form us neurologically for skimming, pattern recognition and distracted hopping from text to text — if we use our phones to read at all.

Increasingly, the very act of reading scarcely seems necessary. Platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts offer a bottomless supply of enthralling, short-form videos. These combine with visual memes, fake news, real news, clickbait, sometimes hostile misinformation and, increasingly, a torrent of A.I.-generated slop content. The result is a media environment that seems like the cognitive equivalent of the junk food aisle and is every bit as difficult to resist as those colorful, unhealthy packages.

A classical liberal might retort: Sure, but just as with junk food, it's up to the individual to make healthy choices. What this fails to take into account, though, is that just like the negative health impacts of junk food overconsumption, the cognitive harms of digital media will be more pronounced at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale.

We see hints of this already. As Dr. Wolf points out, literacy and poverty have long been correlated. Now poor kids spend more time on screens each day than rich ones — in one 2019 study, about two hours more per day for U.S. tweens and teenagers whose families made less than \$35,000 per year, compared with peers whose household incomes exceeded \$100,000. Research indicates that kids who are exposed to more than two hours a day of recreational screen time have worse working memory, processing speed, attention levels, language skills and executive function than kids who are not.

Bluntly: Making healthy cognitive choices is hard. In a culture saturated with more accessible and engrossing forms of entertainment, long-form literacy may soon become the domain of elite subcultures.

Already, elites, religious groups and conservatives are embracing self-imposed limits on tech use. Between 2019 and 2023, over 250 new classical schools, many of them Christian, opened in America, with an ethos centered on long-form “great books” literacy. New guides and initiatives from this crowd abound, such as the recent book “The Tech Exit: A Practical Guide to Freeing Kids and Teens From Smartphones,” by Clare Morell, a fellow at a conservative think tank.

It’s not just conservatives. Tech notables such as Bill Gates and Evan Spiegel have spoken publicly about curbing their kids’ use of screens. Others hire nannies who are required to sign “no phone” contracts, or send their kids to Waldorf schools, where such devices are banned or heavily restricted. The class scissor here is razor-sharp: A majority of classical schools are fee-paying institutions. Shielding your kids from device overuse at the Waldorf School of the Peninsula will set you back \$34,000 a year at the elementary grades.

Many U.S. states, including California, are restricting student smartphone use, which in theory ought to level the playing field. But it is optimistic to assume such rules will be enforced with the same determination in small-class private schools as in massive public schools, let alone in these students’ homes.

Even beyond Silicon Valley, some people are limiting digital stimulation (like social media or video games) for set periods of time as part of the self-improvement practice of dopamine fasting.

The ascetic approach to cognitive fitness is still niche and concentrated among the wealthy. But as new generations reach adulthood having never lived in a world without smartphones, we can expect the culture to stratify ever more starkly. On the one hand, a relatively small group of people will retain, and intentionally develop, the capacity for concentration and long-form reasoning. On the other, a larger general population will be effectively post-literate — with all the consequences this implies for cognitive clarity.

What will happen if this becomes fully realized? An electorate that has lost the capacity for long-form thought will be more tribal, less rational, largely uninterested in facts or even matters of historical record, moved more by vibes than cogent argument and open to fantastical ideas and bizarre conspiracy theories. If that sounds familiar, it may be a sign of how far down this path the West has already traveled.

For canny operators, such a public affords new opportunities for corruption. Oligarchs attempting to shape policy to their advantage will benefit from the fact that few will have the attention span to track or challenge policies in dull, technical fields; what a majority now wants is not forensic investigation but a new video short “owning” the other tribe. We can expect the governing class to adapt pragmatically to the electorate’s collective decline in rational capacity, for example, by retaining the rituals associated with mass democracy while quietly shifting key policy areas beyond the reach of a capricious and easily manipulated citizenry. I do not celebrate this, but our net-native youth seem unfazed: International polls show waning support for democracy among Gen Z.

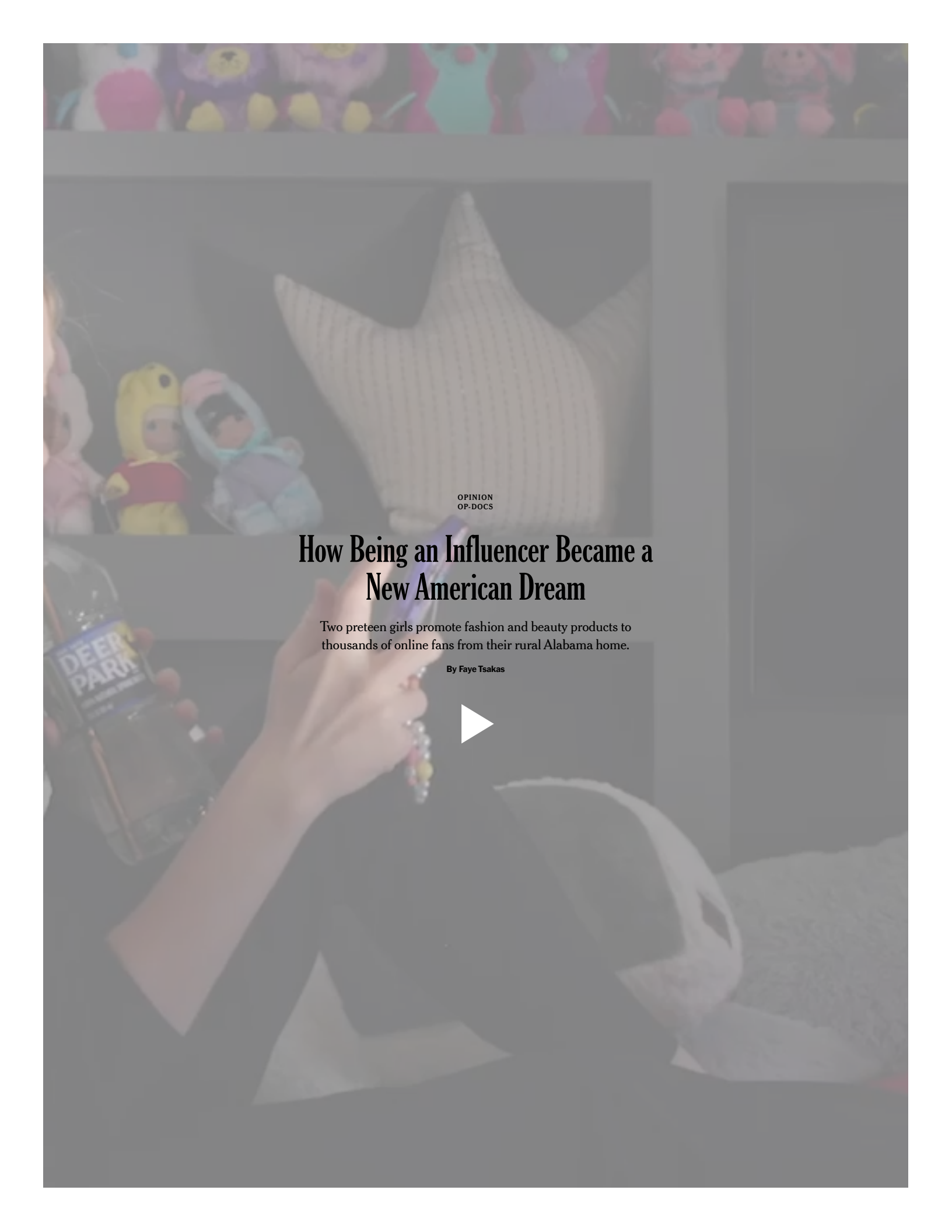
Lest you mistake me, there is no reason the opportunity to sideline the electorate or to arbitrage the gap between vibes and policy should especially favor either the red team or the blue team. This post-literate world favors demagogues skilled at code-switching between the elite language of policy and the populist one of meme-slop. It favors oligarchs with good social media game and those with more self-assurance than integrity. It does not favor those with little money, little political power and no one to speak up for them.

Mary Harrington is a journalist based in Britain. She is a contributing editor at UnHerd and the author of “Feminism Against Progress” and the forthcoming “The King and the Swarm.”

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 10 of the New York edition with the headline: Thinking Is Becoming a Luxury Good



OPINION
OF DOCS

How Being an Influencer Became a New American Dream

Two preteen girls promote fashion and beauty products to thousands of online fans from their rural Alabama home.

By Faye Tsakas



By Faye Tsakas
Ms. Tsakas is a documentary filmmaker.

Dec. 10, 2024

Whenever I browse social media, I see advice and products for self-improvement — a deluge of elusive promises tethered to consumer goods. How to look more angular or more toned, feel more energized, age backward. Capitalism and modern technology have mixed to create an internet world where users are transformed into brands. As a filmmaker, I’m drawn to document this culture.

I first came across Peyton and Lyla, two preteen sisters and influencers on Instagram, two years ago. (Since they are minors, their last names are withheld to protect their privacy.) From their rural Alabama home under their mother’s watchful gaze, they hawk fashion and beauty products to tens of thousands of online fans around the world. Every day, packages arrive at their doorstep for them to unbox and try out — deluxe makeup sets, floral dresses, exercise bikes — all free, as if delivered by a shopping mall Santa.

With their parents’ permission, I began filming the sisters’ daily lives as influencers; in this short documentary, “Christmas, Every Day,” they shift between performance and reality. Peyton and Lyla, who were 11 and 12 at the time of filming, see themselves as instilling confidence, positivity and a girl-power attitude for other girls — ideas that I wanted to explore within the broader context of modern consumerism.

Whether as creators or viewers or consumers, children are spending more time online at younger and younger ages. What kid wouldn’t want a stream of likes and gifts, waking up to the feeling of, as Peyton and Lyla’s parents put it, “Christmas, every day”? What does it mean to be participants in a larger social media system that encourages and even demands certain behaviors from its users, especially women and girls?

In a time of immense wealth disparity, influencer culture has created a more fantastical kind of American dream. (Perhaps that’s why nearly one-third of preteens say becoming an influencer is a career goal.) Seeing the field’s potential for a steady income — not to mention the prestige of an ever-growing follower count — some parents encourage it. I sought to go behind the scenes of this new creator economy with curiosity and a focus on the girls’ experiences, aiming to allow viewers to come to their own conclusions.

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Faye Tsakas is a filmmaker based in Los Angeles.

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Unit 2: How do we share culture responsibly? Does cultural appropriation exist?

Humanities › Issues › Race Relations › Understanding Race & Racism

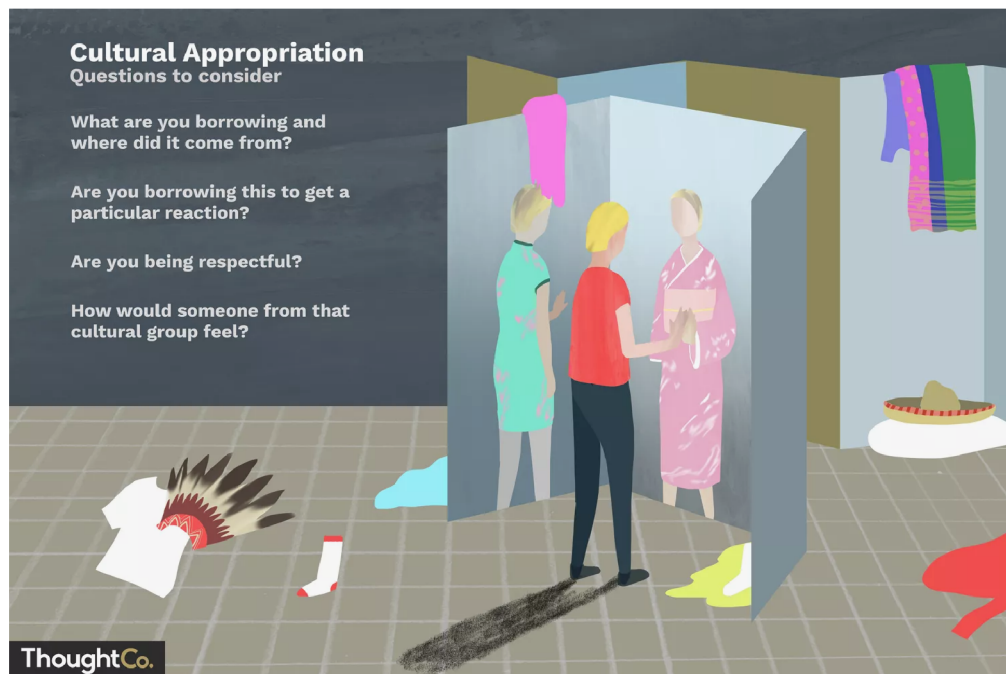
A Guide to Understanding and Avoiding Cultural Appropriation

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Appropriation

By **Nadra Kareem Nittle**

Updated on February 04, 2021

Cultural appropriation is the adoption of certain elements from another culture without the consent of people who belong to that culture. It's a controversial topic, one that activists and celebrities like Adrienne Keene and [Jesse Williams](#) have helped bring into the national spotlight. However, much of the public remains confused about what the term actually means.

People from hundreds of different ethnicities make up the U.S. population, so it's not surprising that cultural groups rub off on each other at times. Americans who grow up in diverse communities may pick up the dialect, customs, and religious traditions of the cultural groups that surround them.

Cultural appropriation is an entirely different matter. It has little to do with one's exposure to and familiarity with different cultures. Instead, cultural appropriation typically involves members of a dominant group exploiting the culture of less privileged groups. Quite often, this is done along racial and ethnic lines with little understanding of the latter's history, experience, and traditions.

Defining Cultural Appropriation

In order to understand cultural appropriation, we must first look at the two words that make up the term. [Culture is defined](#) as the beliefs, ideas, traditions, speech, and material objects associated with a particular group of people. Appropriation is the illegal, unfair, or unjust taking of something that doesn't belong to you.

Susan Scafidi, a law professor at [Fordham University](#), told [Jezebel](#) that it's difficult to give a concise explanation of cultural appropriation. The author of "[Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law](#)," defined cultural appropriation as follows:

"Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects."

In the United States, cultural appropriation almost always involves members of the dominant culture (or those who identify with it) "borrowing" from the

and cultural symbols; Chicano style and fashion; and Asian martial arts and dress have all fallen prey to cultural appropriation.

“Borrowing” is a key component of cultural appropriation and there are many examples in recent American history. However, it can be traced back to [the racial beliefs of early America](#), an era when many white people saw people of color as less than human, and the federal government codified that ideology into law. Society has yet to move completely beyond those gross injustices. And insensitivity to the historical and current sufferings of marginalized groups remains apparent today.

Appropriation in Music

In the 1950s, white musicians appropriated the music their Black counterparts invented. Because racism relegated Black people to the sidelines of U.S. society, record executives chose to have White artists replicate the sound of Black musicians. The result is that music like rock-n-roll is largely associated with White people and its Black pioneers, like Little Richard, are denied the credit for the contributions that they deserve.

In the early 21st century, cultural appropriation remains a concern. Musicians such as [Madonna, Gwen Stefani, and Miley Cyrus](#) have all been accused of cultural appropriation. Madonna's famous voguing began in Black and Latinx sectors of the gay club scene in New York City, and Gwen Stefani has faced criticism for her fixation on Harajuku culture from Japan.

In 2013, Miley Cyrus became the pop star most associated with cultural appropriation. During recorded and live performances, the former child star began to twerk, a dance style with roots in the African American community.



 Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke perform during the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards.

Theo Wargo / Getty Images

Appropriation of Native Cultures

Native American fashion, art, and rituals have also been appropriated into mainstream U.S. culture. Major corporations have reproduced and sold indigenous fashions for profit, and eclectic religious and spiritual practitioners have adopted Indigenous rituals.

A well-known case involves the sweat lodge retreats of James Arthur Ray. In 2009, three people died during one of his adopted sweat lodge ceremonies in Sedona, Arizona. This prompted the elders of Native American tribes to speak out against this practice because these "plastic shamans" have not been properly trained. Covering the lodge with plastic tarps was just one of Ray's mistakes and he was later sued for impersonation.

Similarly, in Australia, a period occurred when it was common for Aboriginal art to be copied by non-Aboriginal artists, often marketed and sold as authentic. This led to a renewed movement to authenticate Aboriginal products.

Cultural Appropriation Takes Many Forms

Buddhist tattoos, Muslim-inspired headdresses as fashion, and [White gay men adopting the dialect of Black women](#) are other examples of cultural appropriation. The examples are nearly endless and context is often key.

For example, was the tattoo done in reverence or because it's cool? Would a Muslim man wearing the keffiyeh be considered a terrorist for that simple fact? At the same time, if a White man wears it, is it a fashion statement?

they deserve and often the capital owed to them as well. Many of the pioneers of rock music died penniless, while the White musicians who ripped them off earned millions.

Ultimately, art and music forms that originated with oppressed groups come to be associated with members of the dominant group. As a result, the dominant group is deemed innovative and edgy, while the disadvantaged groups they “borrow” from face [negative stereotypes](#), implying they’re lacking in intelligence and creativity.

When singer Katy Perry performed as a geisha at the American Music Awards in 2013, she described it as an homage to the Asian culture. Asian Americans disagreed with this assessment, declaring her performance “yellowface.” They also objected to the song choice, “Unconditionally,” for reinforcing the stereotype that Asian women are passive.

The question of whether this form of “borrowing” is an homage or an insult lies at the core of cultural appropriation. What one person perceives as a tribute, others may perceive as disrespectful. It's a fine line and one that must be carefully considered.

How to Avoid Cultural Appropriation

Every individual can make the decision to show sensitivity toward others. On occasion, someone may not be able to recognize a harmful appropriation unless it's pointed out. This is why it's important to recognize why you're buying or doing something associated with [another culture](#).

To behave responsibly and sensitively toward other groups, ask yourself a series of questions:

Why are you “borrowing” this? Is it out of genuine interest? Is it something you feel called to do? Or, does it simply look appealing and trendy?

What is the source? For material items such as artwork, was it made by someone from that culture? Has that individual given permission for the item to be sold?

How respectful is this work to the culture? Would people from that group object to the piece of art or to it being sold to outsiders?

The sharing of ideas, traditions, and material items is what makes life interesting and helps diversify the world. A genuine interest in other cultures is not necessarily wrong, but cultural appropriation raises questions that should not be ignored.

In Defense of Cultural Appropriation



By Kenan Malik

June 14, 2017

LONDON — It is just as well that I’m a writer, not an editor. Were I editing a newspaper or magazine, I might soon be out of a job. For this is an essay in defense of cultural appropriation.

In Canada last month, three editors lost their jobs after making such a defense.

The controversy began when Hal Niedzviecki, editor of *Write*, the magazine of the Canadian Writers’ Union, penned an editorial defending the right of white authors to create characters from minority or indigenous backgrounds. Within days, a social media backlash forced him to resign. The Writers’ Union issued an apology for an article that its Equity Task Force claimed “re-entrenches the deeply racist assumptions” held about art.

Another editor, Jonathan Kay, of *The Walrus* magazine, was also compelled to step down after tweeting his support for Mr. Niedzviecki. Meanwhile, the broadcaster CBC moved Steve Ladurantaye, managing editor of its flagship news program *The National*, to a different post, similarly for an “unacceptable tweet” about the controversy.

It’s not just editors who have to tread carefully. Last year, the novelist Lionel Shriver generated a worldwide storm after defending cultural appropriation in an address to the Brisbane Writers Festival. Earlier this year, controversy erupted when New York’s Whitney Museum picked for its Biennial Exhibition Dana Schutz’s painting of the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American murdered by two white men in Mississippi in 1955. Many objected to a white painter like Ms. Schutz depicting such a traumatic moment in black history. The British artist Hannah Black organized a petition to have the work destroyed.

Other works of art have been destroyed. The sculptor Sam Durant’s piece “Scaffold,” honoring 38 Native Americans executed in 1862 in Minneapolis, was recently being assembled in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. But after protests from indigenous activists that Mr. Durant was appropriating their history, the artist dismantled his own work, and made its wood available to be burned in a Dakota Sioux ceremony.

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What is cultural appropriation, and why is it so controversial? Susan Scafidi, a law professor at Fordham University, defines it as “taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture without permission.” This can include the “unauthorized use of another culture’s dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc.”

Appropriation suggests theft, and a process analogous to the seizure of land or artifacts. In the case of culture, however, what is called appropriation is not theft but messy interaction. Writers and artists necessarily engage with the experiences of others. Nobody owns a culture, but everyone inhabits one, and in inhabiting a culture, one finds the tools for reaching out to other cultures.

Critics of cultural appropriation insist that they are opposed not to cultural engagement, but to racism. They want to protect marginalized cultures and ensure that such cultures speak for themselves, not simply be seen through the eyes of more privileged groups.

Certainly, cultural engagement does not take place on a level playing field. Racism and inequality shape the ways in which people imagine others. Yet it is difficult to see how creating gated cultures helps promote social justice.

There are few figures more important to the development of rock 'n' roll than Chuck Berry (who died in March). In the 1950s, white radio stations refused to play his songs, categorizing them as “race music.” Then came Elvis Presley. A white boy playing the same tunes was cool. Elvis was feted, Mr. Berry and other black pioneers largely ignored. Racism defined who became the cultural icon.

But imagine that Elvis had been prevented from appropriating so-called black music. Would that have challenged racism, or eradicated Jim Crow laws? Clearly not. It took a social struggle — the civil rights movement — to bring about change. That struggle was built not on cultural separation, but on the demand for equal rights and universal values.

Campaigns against cultural appropriation reveal the changing meaning of what it is to challenge racism. Once, it was a demand for equal treatment for all. Now it calls for cultures to be walled off and boundaries to be policed.

But who does the policing? Every society has its gatekeepers, whose role is to protect certain institutions, maintain the privileges of particular groups and cordon off some beliefs from challenge. Such gatekeepers protect not the marginalized but the powerful. Racism itself is a form of gatekeeping, a means of denying racialized groups equal rights, access and opportunities.

In minority communities, the gatekeepers are usually self-appointed guardians whose power rests on their ability to define what is acceptable and what is beyond the bounds. They appropriate for themselves the authority to license certain forms of cultural engagement, and in doing so, entrench their power.

The most potent form of gatekeeping is religion. When certain beliefs are deemed sacred, they are put beyond questioning. To challenge such beliefs is to commit blasphemy.

The accusation of cultural appropriation is a secular version of the charge of blasphemy. It's the insistence that certain beliefs and images are so important to particular cultures that they may not be appropriated by others. This is most clearly seen in the debate about Ms. Schutz's painting “Open Casket.”

In 1955, Emmett Till's mother urged the publication of photographs of her son's mutilated body as it lay in its coffin. Till's murder, and the photographs, played a major role in shaping the civil rights movement and have acquired an almost sacred quality. It was from those photos that Ms. Schutz began her painting.

To suggest that she, as a white painter, should not depict images of black suffering is as troubling as the demand by some Muslims that Salman Rushdie's novel “The Satanic Verses” should be censored because of supposed blasphemies in its depiction of Islam. In fact, it's more troubling because, as the critic Adam Shatz has observed, the campaign against Ms. Schutz's work contains an “implicit disavowal that acts of radical sympathy, and imaginative identification, are possible across racial lines.”

Seventy years ago, racist radio stations refused to play “race music” for a white audience. Today, antiracist activists insist that white painters should not portray black subjects. To appropriate a phrase from a culture not my own: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Kenan Malik (@kenanmalik) is the author, most recently, of “The Quest for a Moral Compass: A Global History of Ethics” and a contributing opinion writer.

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Commentary: Cultural Appropriation Is, In Fact, Indefensible

JUNE 28, 2017 · 10:00 AM ET

By K. Tempest Bradford



Elvis Presley, in the studio in 1956 — Presley's success was undoubtedly driven by the material he appropriated from black musicians.

Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

Last week, the *New York Times* published an op-ed titled "In Defense of Cultural Appropriation" in which writer Kenan Malik attempted to extol the virtues of artistic appropriation and chastise those who would stand in the way of necessary "cultural engagement." (No link, because you have Google and I'd rather not give

that piece more traffic than it deserves.) What would have happened, he argues, had Elvis Presley not been able to swipe the sounds of black musicians?

Malik is not the first person to defend cultural appropriation. He joins a long list that, most recently, has included prominent members of the Canadian literary community and author Lionel Shriver.

But the truth is that cultural appropriation is indefensible. Those who defend it either don't understand what it is, misrepresent it to muddy the conversation, or ignore its complexity — discarding any nuances and making it easy to dismiss both appropriation and those who object to it.

“

Writing inclusive fiction might involve appropriation if it's done badly, but that's not a given.

At the start of the most recent debate, Canadian author Hal Niedzviecki called on the readers of *Write* magazine to "Write what you don't know ... Relentlessly explore the lives of people who aren't like you. ... Win the Appropriation Prize." Amid the outcry over this editorial, there were those who wondered why this statement would be objectionable. Shouldn't authors "write the Other?" Shouldn't there be more representative fiction?

Yes, of course. The issue here is that Niedzwiecki conflated cultural appropriation and the practice of writing characters with very different identities from yourself — and they're not the same thing. Writing inclusive fiction might involve appropriation if it's done badly, but that's not a given.

Cultural appropriation can feel hard to get a handle on, because boiling it down to a two-sentence dictionary definition does no one any favors. Writer Maisha Z. Johnson offers an excellent starting point by describing it not only as the act of an individual, but an individual working within a "*power dynamic* in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed *by that dominant group*."

That's why appropriation and exchange are two different things, Johnson says — there's no power imbalance involved in an exchange. And when artists appropriate, they can profit from what they take, while the oppressed group gets nothing.

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I teach classes and seminars alongside author and editor Nisi Shawl on Writing the Other, and the foundation of our work is that authors *should* create characters from many different races, cultures, class backgrounds, physical abilities, and genders, even if — especially if — these don't match their own. We are not alone in this. You won't find many people advising authors to only



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create characters similar to themselves. You will find many who say: Don't write characters from minority or marginalized identities if you are not going to put in the hard work to do it well and avoid cultural appropriation and other harmful outcomes. These are different messages. But writers often see or hear the latter and imagine that it means the former. And editorials like Niedzwiecki's don't help the matter.

Complicating things even further, those who tend to see appropriation as exchange are often the ones who profit from it.

Even Malik's example involving rock and roll isn't as simple as Elvis "stealing" from black artists. Before he even came along, systematic oppression and segregation in America meant black musicians didn't have access to the same

opportunities for mainstream exposure, income, or success as white ones. Elvis and other rock and roll musicians were undoubtedly influenced by black innovators, but over time the genre came to be regarded as a cultural product created, perfected by, and only accessible to whites.

This is the "messy interaction" Malik breezes over in dismissing the idea of appropriation as theft: A repeating pattern that's recognizable across many different cultural spheres, from fashion and the arts to literature and food.

UNIT 3: HOW CAN MANY CULTURES IN ONE NATION EXIST PEACEFULLY?

DAVID BROOKS

How to Save a Sad, Lonely, Angry and Mean Society

Jan. 25, 2024



By David Brooks
Opinion Columnist

Recently, while browsing in the Museum of Modern Art store in New York, I came across a tote bag with the inscription, “You are no longer the same after experiencing art.” It’s a nice sentiment, I thought, but is it true? Or to be more specific: Does consuming art, music, literature and the rest of what we call culture make you a better person?

Ages ago, Aristotle thought it did, but these days a lot of people seem to doubt it. Surveys show that Americans are abandoning cultural institutions. Since the early 2000s, fewer and fewer people say that they visit art museums and galleries, go to see plays or attend classical music concerts, opera or ballet. College students are fleeing the humanities for the computer sciences, having apparently decided that a professional leg up is more important than the state of their souls. Many professors seem to have lost faith too. They’ve become race, class and gender political activists. The ensuing curriculum is less “How does George Eliot portray marriage?” and more “Workers of the world, unite!”

And yet I don’t buy it. I confess I still cling to the old faith that culture is vastly more important than politics or some pre-professional training in algorithms and software systems. I’m convinced that consuming culture furnishes your mind with emotional knowledge and wisdom; it helps you take a richer and more meaningful view of your own experiences; it helps you understand, at least a bit, the depths of what’s going on in the people right around you.

The novelist Alice Walker lamented that she lacked models. She wasn’t aware of enough Black female writers who could serve as exemplars and inspirations as she tried to perceive her world and tell her stories. Then she found the novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, who, decades before, had pointed the way, shown her how to see and express, enabled her to write about her mother’s life, about voodoo, the structures of authentic Black folklore. Thanks to Hurston she had a new way to see, a deeper way to connect to her own heritage.

I’d argue that we have become so sad, lonely, angry and mean as a society in part because so many people have not been taught or don’t bother practicing to enter sympathetically into the minds of their fellow human beings. We’re overpoliticized while growing increasingly undermoralized, underspiritualized, undercultured.

The alternative is to rediscover the humanist code. It is based on the idea that unless you immerse yourself in the humanities, you may never confront the most important question: How should I live my life?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, argued that we consume culture to enlarge our hearts and minds. We start with the tiny circle of our own experience, but gradually we acquire more expansive ways of seeing the world. Peer pressure and convention may try to hem us in, but the humanistic mind expands outward to wider and wider circles of awareness.

I went to college at a time and in a place where many people believed that the great books, poems, paintings and pieces of music really did hold the keys to the kingdom. If you studied them carefully and thought about them deeply, they would improve your taste, your judgments, your conduct.

Our professors at the University of Chicago had sharpened their minds and renovated their hearts by learning from and arguing against books. They burned with intensity as they tried to convey what past authors and artists were trying to say.

The teachers welcomed us into a great conversation, traditions of dispute stretching back to Aeschylus, Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Clifford Odets. They held up visions of excellence, people who had seen farther and deeper, such as Augustine, Sylvia Plath and Richard Wright. They introduced us to the range of moral ecologies that have been built over the centuries and come down as sets of values by which we can choose to live — stoicism, Buddhism, romanticism, rationalism, Marxism, liberalism, feminism.

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The message was that all of us could improve our taste and judgment by becoming familiar with what was best — the greatest art, philosophy, literature and history. And this journey toward wisdom was a lifelong affair.

The hard sciences help us understand the natural world. The social sciences help us measure behavior patterns across populations. But culture and the liberal arts help us enter the subjective experience of particular people: how this unique individual felt; how this other one longed and suffered. We have the chance to move with them, experience the world, a bit, the way they experience it.

We know from studies by the psychologists Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley that reading literature is associated with heightened empathy skills. Deep reading, immersing yourself in novels with complex characters, engaging with stories that explore the complexity of this character’s motivations or that character’s wounds, is a training ground for understanding human variety. It empowers us to see the real people in our lives more accurately and more generously, to better understand their intentions, fears and needs, the hidden kingdom of their unconscious drives. The resulting knowledge is not factual knowledge but emotional knowledge.

The novelist Frederick Buechner once observed that not all the faces Rembrandt painted were remarkable. Some are just average-looking old people. But even the plainest face “is so remarkably seen that it forces you to see it remarkably.” We are jolted into not taking other people for granted but to sense and respect the immense depth of each human soul.



Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son." Fine Art Images/Heritage Images, via Getty Images

When I come across a Rembrandt in a museum, I try to train myself to see with even half of Rembrandt's humanity. Once in St. Petersburg, I had the chance to stand face to face with one of his greatest paintings, "The Return of the Prodigal Son." He painted this one at the end of his life, when popular taste had left him behind, his finances were in ruins, his wife and four of his five children were in their graves. I have seen other renderings of that parable, but not one in which the rebel son is so broken, fragile, pathetic, almost hairless and cast down. The father envelops the young man with a love that is patient, selfless and forbearing. Close observers note the old man's hands. One is masculine, and protective. The other is feminine, and tender.

Though this painting is about a parable, it's not here to teach us some didactic lesson. We are simply witnessing an emotional moment, which is about fracture and redemption, an aging artist painting a scene in which he imagines all his losses are restored. It is a painting about what it is like to finally realize your deepest yearnings — for forgiveness, safety, reconciliation, home. Meanwhile, the son's older brother is off to the side, his face tensely rippling with a mixture of complex thoughts, which I read as rigid scorn trying to repress semiconscious shoots of fraternal tenderness.

Experiences like this help us understand ourselves in light of others — the way we are like them and the way we are different. As Toni Morrison put it: "Like Frederick Douglass talking about his grandmother, and James Baldwin talking about his father, and Simone de Beauvoir talking about her mother, these people are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life."

Experiences with great artworks deepen us in ways that are hard to describe. To have visited Chartres Cathedral or finished "The Brothers Karamazov" is not about acquiring new facts but to feel somehow elevated, enlarged, altered. In Rainer Maria Rilke's novel "The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge," the protagonist notices that as he ages, he's able to perceive life on a deeper level: "I am learning to see. I don't know why it is, but everything penetrates more deeply into me and does not stop at the place where until now it always used to finish."

Mark Edmundson teaches literature at the University of Virginia and is one of those who still lives by the humanist code. In his book "Why Read?" he describes the potential charge embedded in a great work of art: "Literature is, I believe, our best goad toward new beginnings, our best chance for what we might call secular rebirth. However much society at large despises imaginative writing, however much those supposedly committed to preserve and spread literary art may demean it, the fact remains that in literature there abide major hopes for human renovation."

Wouldn't you love to take a course from that guy?

How does it work? How does culture do its thing? The shortest answer is that culture teaches us how to see. "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way," the Victorian art critic John Ruskin wrote. "Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see."

Ruskin intuited something that neuroscience has since confirmed: Perception is not a simple and straightforward act. You don't open your eyes and ears and record the data that floods in, the way in those old cameras light was recorded on film. Instead, perception is a creative act. You take what you've experienced during the whole course of your life, the models you've stored up in your head, and you apply them to help you interpret all the ambiguous data your senses pick up, to help you discern what really matters in a situation, what you desire, what you find admirable and what you find contemptible.

Another way to put it is this: Artistic creation is the elemental human act. When they are making pictures or poems or stories, artists are constructing a complex, coherent representation of the world. That's what all of us are doing every minute as we're looking around. We're all artists of a sort. The universe is a silent, colorless place. It's just waves and particles out there. But by using our imaginations, we construct colors and sounds, tastes and stories, drama, laughter, joy and sorrow.

Works of culture make us better perceivers. We artists learn from other artists. Paintings, poems, novels and music help multiply and refine the models we use to perceive and construct reality. By attending to great perceivers, the Louis Armstrongs, the Jorge Luis Borgeses, the Jane Austens, we can more subtly understand what is going on around us and be better at expressing what we see and feel.

When you go to the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, you don't just see Picasso's "Guernica"; forever after you see war through that painting's lenses. You see, or rather feel, the wailing mother, the screaming horse, the chaotic jumble of death and agony, and it becomes less possible to romanticize warfare. We don't just see paintings; we see according to them.



Picasso's "Guernica." Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

This process of refining and expanding our internal mental models is not a dry, purely intellectual process. If we're lucky, and maybe only in rare moments, it can be gut-wrenching and intoxicating, a fusion of the head and the heart. As my friend Arthur Brooks writes, "Think of a time when you heard a piece of music and wanted to cry. Or recall the flutter of your heart as you stared at a delicate, uncannily lifelike sculpture. Or maybe your dizziness as you emerged from a narrow side street in an unfamiliar city and found yourself in a beautiful town square; for me, it was the Piazza San Marco in Venice, with its exquisitely preserved Renaissance architecture. Odds are, you didn't feel as if the object of beauty was a narcotic, deadening you. Instead, it probably precipitated a visceral awakening, much like the shock from a lungful of pure oxygen after breathing smoggy air."

In this kind of education, you are lured by beauty and deeply pierced by myths that seem primeval and strange. Once in college, I was reading Nietzsche's "The Birth of Tragedy" in the library. I don't know what happened next. The book, with its fevered prose and savage genius, sucked me into a trance. I eventually looked up and it was four hours later. I had traveled in time back into some primeval world of bonfires, dancing and Dionysian frenzy, and it left a residue, which I guess you would call a greater awareness of the metaphysical, the transcendent. Life can be much wilder than it seems growing up on a suburban street.

The philosopher Roger Scruton argued that this kind of education gives us the ability to experience emotions that may never happen to us directly. He wrote: "The reader of Wordsworth's 'Prelude' learns how to animate the natural world with pure hopes of his own; the spectator of Rembrandt's 'Night Watch' learns of the pride of corporations, and the benign sadness of civic life; the listener to Mozart's 'Jupiter' symphony is presented with the open floodgates of human joy and creativity; the reader of Proust is led through the enchanted world of childhood and made to understand the uncanny prophecy of our later griefs which those days of joy contain."

Your way of perceiving the world becomes your way of being in the world. If your eyes have been trained to see, even just a bit, by the way Leo Tolstoy saw, if your heart can feel as deeply as a K.D. Lang song, if you understand people with as much complexity as Shakespeare did, then you will have enhanced the way you live your life.

Attention is a moral act. The key to becoming a better person, Iris Murdoch wrote, is to be able to cast a "just and loving attention" on others. It's to shed the self-serving way of looking at the world and to see things as they really are. We can, Murdoch argued, grow by looking. Culture gives us an education in how to attend.

The best of the arts are moral without moralizing. Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment" is an inquiry into the knowledge of right and wrong, told through the eyes of one who suffers, with all the pity and sorrow that involves.

The best of the arts induce humility. In our normal shopping mall life, the consumer is king. The crucial question is, do I like this or not? But we approach great art in a posture of humility and reverence. What does this have to teach me? What was this other human being truly seeking?



The San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts Museum in Spain. Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

One of my heroes is Samuel Johnson, the essayist, playwright, poet, dictionary compiler, one of the greatest critics of all time. He was something of a mess as a young man — lazy, envious, unreliable. Over the decades, he read, wrote and felt his way to greatness. He read with astounding sensitivity. Once at age 9 he was reading “Hamlet” when he came to the ghost scene. He was so terrified he ran to the front door so that he could look out at the people in the street, just to remind himself that he was still in the land of the living.

He wrote biographies of his moral exemplars. He wrote essays, poems and plays about the great works of the Western tradition, and especially about his own sins as if he were trying to beat it out of himself through the scourge of self-examination. (Johnson had a special weakness for envy, and so dozens of his essays in his periodicals mention the sin of envy.) His awareness of human depravity led to humility, self-restraint and redemption. And it worked. By the end of his life he was lavishly generous, a man who had the ability to see the world with absolute honesty and sympathetic perception. Johnson socialized with artists and statesmen, but he invited society’s outcasts to live with him so that he could feed and offer them shelter — a former slave, a doctor who treated the poor, a blind poet. One night he found a woman, most likely a prostitute, lying ill and exhausted on the street. He put her on his back and brought her home to join the others. Johnson was a somewhat tortured Christian. These radical moments of welcome are the essential Gospel-like acts.

When he died, his eulogist observed that he left a chasm in national life that nothing could fill up. He embodied that old humanist ideal. He had become a person of taste, a person of judgment, a person of culture. He died a wonderful man.

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David Brooks has been a columnist with The Times since 2003. He is the author, most recently, of “How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen.” [@nytdavidbrooks](https://twitter.com/nytdavidbrooks)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 12 of the New York edition with the headline: How to Save a Sad, Lonely, Angry and Mean Society

LETTERS

Can Culture Be Society's Savior?

Readers discuss a column by David Brooks about how the arts and humanities make us better people.

Feb. 17, 2024

To the Editor:

Re “How to Save a Sad, Lonely, Angry and Mean Society,” by David Brooks (column, Jan. 28):

As a published author married to a writer/filmmaker, I deeply appreciated Mr. Brooks's column.

It pains me to witness the modern-day devaluation of the arts and humanities. When I was a child, my art history major mother dragged me to many of the world's great museums: the National Gallery of Art, the Met, the Louvre. I may have protested after the first hour, but certain works left indelible impressions: the terrifying passion of Klimt's “Kiss,” the seductive movement of the Calder mobile.

Likewise, literature plunged me into different perspectives. The hard but loving existence of the Ingalls family in “Little House on the Prairie,” the dark history of internment of Japanese Americans in “Farewell to Manzanar,” the peculiar foibles of Shakespearean characters — entering these worlds deepened my understanding of life and fostered compassion, exactly as Mr. Brooks states.

At a time when my alma mater, Stanford University, reports that all five of the top declared undergraduate majors were in STEM fields, with computer science by far the most popular, our society desperately needs voices such as Mr. Brooks's sounding the alarms in defense of our very souls.

MeiMei Fox
Honolulu

To the Editor:

I cannot get past David Brooks's arguing that the humanities help us practice sympathy while saying, “College students are fleeing the humanities for the computer sciences, having apparently decided that a professional leg up is more important than the state of their souls.” As if being able to pay your bills, afford time off or have a family are not important for your soul.

I'm tired of boomers speaking as if later generations' choices reflect our values rather than our constraints. Museums and opera? Or student loans? Those cultural opportunities are often expensive.

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If he wanted to do more than publish a brag list of experiences that made him a cosmopolitan deep thinker, he should have skipped extolling experiences in Venice or Chartres or St. Petersburg or Madrid and considered why people's habits have changed or how society could make these experiences more accessible.

I agree that culture is beneficial and its decline in society is a loss. But his thesis that culture makes us empathetic and wise, while lacking empathy or self-awareness of his privilege in framing the issue, makes a mockery of what could have been a valid point. He seems cultured ... and disconnected.

Jennifer Cruickshank
West Point, N.Y.

To the Editor:

What a pleasure to read David Brooks's full-throated endorsement of the humanities as a site of resistance against the dehumanization that's hollowing out our lives. His appreciation of their value in cultivating humanist qualities is especially welcome at a time when most conversation about education is focused narrowly on the quantitative and measurable.

As a longtime professor of literature and author of “Immeasurable Outcomes: Teaching Shakespeare in the Age of the Algorithm,” I can tell you that when students grapple with complex literary texts, they're developing mental muscles that serve them in their lives. They acquire the versatility, flexibility and adaptability that equip them professionally in a rapidly changing world — but more, they learn arts of survival.

The challenges we face, navigating the human minefield, are of a verbal, social, interactive nature: learning to interpret our fellow human beings, to pick up on meanings behind words, to read between the lines, to push back against the many agendas pushed on us, so we're not “led by the nose as asses are” (as Iago says of Othello), like those poor fools whose bodies litter the stage at the end of a tragedy.

The humanities are not frills — they're survival skills. They have a longer shelf life than a specialized training that may be automated, outsourced or obsolete within a few years.

Gayle Greene
Mendocino, Calif.
The writer is professor emerita at Scripps College.

To the Editor:

David Brooks's fascinating piece on the role of literature and the arts in making us perceptive humans, able to understand others, was on the mark. However, he did not discuss how the study of history adds an important dimension.

Besides guiding us to understand how we arrived at where we are, history reveals the “period eye” of the past. We have to learn to comprehend how and what others have seen in other times and places in order to fully appreciate their art and literature. In doing so, we might realize how supple, complex and varied is the human mind, and how much there is to see and learn.

Steve Davidson
Georgetown, Texas
The writer is professor emeritus of history at Southwestern University.

To the Editor:

Bravo, David Brooks, for explaining why the arts are the soul of humanity and, therefore, should be an important part of one's formal/informal education. Many years ago, colleges acknowledged that need by creating “core requirements” for graduation. Now, advocates of “personal freedoms” have eliminated them as irrelevant.

I used to advise my high school math students to take the minimum number of required courses for their major, immerse themselves in diverse studies, including the arts, and save career education for their graduate degrees.

The arts are so essential that I intermingled them with math (yes, that's possible!). Thirty students and I would take about 10 trips a year to marinate in culture (classical music concerts, ballet, opera, theater, art museums, ethnic cuisines, etc.). By reinstating the arts as part of a normal education, our society might reverse its obvious downward spiral.

Martin Rudolph
Oceanside, N.Y.

To the Editor:

Thanks to David Brooks for his inspired paean to the humanities and the importance of exposure to art and culture. He reminds us that these are crucial elements in saving our society from much of the darkness that currently envelops it.

Hopefully, Mr. Brooks will remember his own words the next time he is tempted to inveigh against the “cultural elites” to whom he regularly attributes the fracturing of the American body politic.

On the one hand he wants us to study Rembrandt and Boswell; on the other he complains about people who have had that kind of education, suggesting that their snobbery is at the root of much that ails us. Which is it, Mr. Brooks?

James Gertmenian
Cumberland Foreside, Maine

🕒 This article was published more than **2 years ago**

Democracy Dies in Darkness



Opinion

David Von Drehle

Our common culture is collapsing

February 11, 2022

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Not so long ago, professors of literature were known to wonder what would happen when the steep decline in church attendance produced a generation of students unfamiliar with the Bible. How would those readers make sense of the Western world's books and poetry?

The Bible was the lumberyard from which Western writers drew their material. They could discuss Solomonic wisdom or Job-like suffering, write phrases such as "turn the other cheek" or "prodigal son," or give their books titles such as "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" or "East of Eden" with confidence that these two-by-fours — these lengths of rebar — would bear weight in a reader's mind.

As it turns out, that rather large question was actually much too small. Yes, the shared biblical framework crumbled, but as part of a broader collapse of all common cultural structure. History will likely conclude that the 20th century was the high-water mark of mass communication.

It made sense to speak of "the audience" for television, for movies, for music. It made sense to measure "audience share." The television set pulled in maybe half a dozen channels. Everyone watched whatever was showing at whatever time of day the programmers chose to show it. The radio dial was the same in every automobile dashboard.

On Feb. 28, 1983, more than 60 percent of all households with a TV in the United States watched the final episode of the sitcom "M*A*S*H" — all on the same platform, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and all in the same evening. It was a fair bet that everyone you met, young and old, knew what "the Swamp" looked like and what drink was served there. They knew that Capt. B.J. Hunnicutt of Mill Valley, Calif., was named for his parents, Bea and Jay, and that Max Klinger was a fan of the Toledo Mud Hens baseball team.

Today, little remains of that common culture. Only the Super Bowl, played this Sunday in Los Angeles, attracts an audience of comparable proportions. Even the Olympic Games, unfolding on the fake snow of Beijing, cannot compel the American people to sit down and share an experience together.

The splintering of culture is not entirely a bad thing. There has never been more shows to watch, more music to hear, more essays to read. When friends or family gather, a standard feature of conversation is the sharing of recent favorites. One person has been watching "1883." Another recommends "Will Smith's Bucket List." A side conversation crops up between two "Ozark" fans, while across the room someone exclaims, "What do you mean you've never seen 'The Wire'?!"

The proliferation of culture means more variety for consumers and more paths for artists. YouTube and Spotify are the new star-making machinery behind the popular song.

Or, conversely, more culture can mean less variety, as entertainment platforms frantically seek out each individual's particular tastes and offer more of the same. Did you find that World War II documentary interesting? How about eight straight hours of them? So you like Tom Petty? Here's an entire satellite radio station devoted to him. Maybe you'd like a month of Christmas movies. Or a channel exclusively about golf.

When narrowcasting meets an especially desirable demographic slice, huge sums of money and creative talent are pressed into the service of monotonous sameness. Do you like blockbuster films about superheroes? You had better if you're going to the cineplex.

Of course, these same forces are at work in the cultural space commonly called "news." At the zenith of mass communication, the three major television networks produced nearly identical evening news programs. These, in turn, served as a mutual basis for political argument and competition. Today, while the network offerings remain largely unchanged, "news" is available on cable and the Internet tailored to individual tastes. There is progressive news, nationalist news, conservative news and so on. Once a person finds a congenial source, it is possible to snuggle under that blanket and shut out alternatives. The argument becomes the starting point; there is no mutual foundation.

There are signs that the splintering of culture might have limits, and that those limits might be approaching. As Paul Farhi recently observed in The Post, though audiences are scattered, there remains a hunger for common experiences. Fewer people consume the Olympics in long, narrated blocks of time on network television. But millions curate their own Olympics from selections posted to YouTube or TikTok. The fact that viewership was low for, say, the men's figure skating competition doesn't mean that the nation is unaware of Nathan Chen and his extraordinary athleticism.

Perhaps Americans will learn, in a similar way, to curate a new set of starting points for our political debates. In the meantime, we have a Super Bowl to watch together.

Life Kit

Why All Parents Should Talk With Their Kids About Social Identity

OCTOBER 8, 2019 · 5:03 AM ET

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION



Cory Turner

3-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST Download

Transcript



Fahmida Azim for NPR

A majority of parents rarely, if ever, discuss race/ethnicity, gender, class or other categories of social identity with their kids, according to a new, nationally representative survey of more than 6,000 parents conducted by Sesame Workshop and NORC at the University of Chicago. The researchers behind *Sesame Street* say the fact that so many families aren't talking about these issues is a problem because children are hard-wired to notice differences at a young age — and they're asking questions.

" 'Why is this person darker than me?' 'Why is this person wearing that hat on their head?' " These are just some of the social identity questions parents might hear, says Tanya Haider, executive vice president for strategy, research and ventures at Sesame Workshop. "We sometimes are scared to talk about these things. If the adults stiffen up and say, 'Oh, you shouldn't say that loudly,' that's sending [children] a cue that there's something wrong."



PARENTING: DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS Talking Race With Young Children

And there's nothing wrong, Haider says, with a child's natural curiosity. What's risky is when kids are left alone to make sense of the differences they see, with little more than stereotypes, television and guesswork to guide them.

For the past year, NPR and Sesame Workshop have collaborated on a podcast for parents — part of NPR's *Life Kit* project. Together, they've covered all sorts of subjects, from how to raise kind kids and navigate divorce to how to talk with children about death. Earlier this year, NPR and Sesame Workshop devoted an entire episode to the importance of talking about race and other social categories with kids and provided parents with some helpful strategies.

These new survey results raise an important question: Why are so many parents not talking about these big social categories with their kids?

The answer's complicated.

The vast majority of parents surveyed say they do feel comfortable talking about social identity. Many just don't do it.

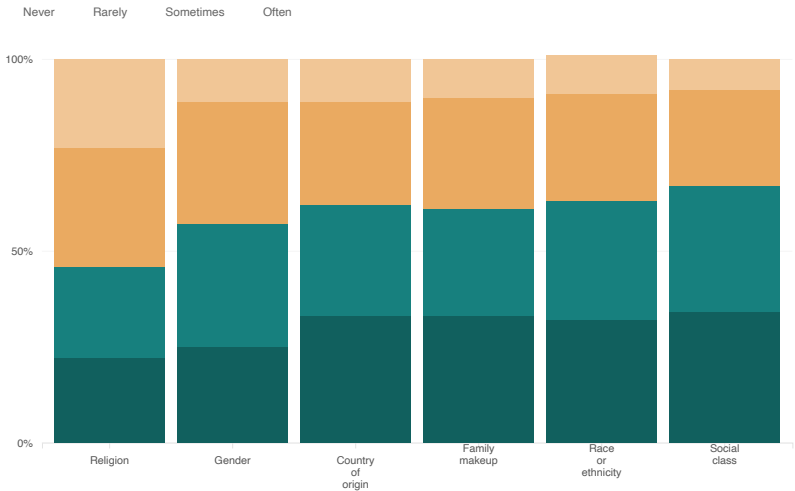
That doesn't surprise Beverly Daniel Tatum, a psychologist and author of the classic, *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria*. "My guess is, some parents — certain majority parents — might think, 'What's to talk about?' You know? Maybe there's this sense of, it doesn't really need to be talked about."

And the survey data back that guess. Parents of color are much more likely than white parents to report that race/ethnicity not only shapes their child's identity but also, according to the report, "Black (64%), Asian (64%), and Hispanic (51%) parents are more likely than White parents (41%) to say that race and ethnicity shape how other people treat their child a lot or some."

No wonder families of color are more likely to talk with their kids about race/ethnicity than are white families. Sixty-one percent of black parents, 56 percent of Asian parents and 46 percent of Hispanic parents say their families discuss race/ethnicity often or sometimes. Just a quarter of white parents say they talk about it with any frequency. The survey results for how families discuss other categories were not broken down this way.

How Often Do You Discuss Identity With Your Children?

A majority of the parents surveyed said that they were very comfortable discussing various social identity topics with their children, but in practice didn't do so often.



Source: Sesame Workshop & NORC at the University of Chicago
Credit: Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR

Don't see the graphic above? Click here.

Even when parents do talk about social identity, according to the survey, many wait until their kids are 10, 11 or even 12 years old. Jennifer Kotler Clarke, who oversaw the Sesame survey, says parents seem to think younger kids don't notice these differences, though "there's all sorts of research that suggest that children very early on notice definitely physical differences between different people and they make meaning of those differences. And there's discrimination very early on."

How early on? Try six months old.

In a previous Life Kit episode on how to raise kind kids, we reported that, even as babies, humans not only show a preference for those who look and act like us, but they also show a desire to see those not like us be treated badly.

In a University of Toronto study, infants as young as six months old showed a preference for members of their own race and against members of different races. And this us vs. them mentality extends beyond physical differences.

[Professor Kiley] Hamlin, at the University of British Columbia, introduced a new variable to her puppet shows. When the puppet and baby liked different

snacks, the baby wasn't just less kind. She often wanted the puppet that did not share her snack preference punished.

"Babies did seem to care more about who was like them than they cared about niceness and meanness," says Hamlin.

If Your Child Has Heard Comments About Their Identity, Do You Discuss It With Them?

Across different identities, parents whose children have heard at least one negative comment about their identities talk to their children about those identities more than those who say their children have not heard a negative comment. For example, of children who have heard negative things about their religion, 70% discuss it with their parents.

TOPIC	PERCENT WHO DISCUSSED		
	HAS HEARD NEGATIVE	DON'T KNOW IF NEGATIVE	HAS NOT HEARD NEGATIVE
Religion	70%	54%	49%
Gender	61%	41%	38%
Family Makeup	65%	38%	32%
Country of Origin	64%	40%	32%
Race or Ethnicity	60%	36%	28%
Social Class	60%	29%	27%

Source: Sesame Workshop & NORC at the University of Chicago
Credit: Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR

Don't see the graphic above? Click here.

As a result, Kotler Clarke says, all grown-ups need to be proactive about explaining the differences kids see and making clear: Different isn't bad. If children don't get help from parents "and have to try to make meaning of different social identities [on their own], they may come up with all sorts of weird and strange reasons that people are somewhat different."

Exhibit A: Beverly Daniel Tatum still remembers the day her 3-year-old son was told by a white preschool classmate: " 'Your skin is brown because you drink chocolate milk.' " And then, she says, her son came home and asked if it was true. No, she assured him, your skin is brown because of something called melanin. We all have it, she told him — you simply have a little more.



NPR ED

Why Schools Fail To Teach Slavery's 'Hard History'

This interaction highlights what may be the single biggest warning sign in Sesame's new survey results: Many of the parents who are talking not just about race/ethnicity but also gender, class and religion are doing so because their children are hearing negative comments about their *own* identities. Beverly Daniel

Tatum explained the truth to her son about his skin color. But what about the little boy whose misconception set off this chain reaction?

According to Sesame's survey results, 40 percent of black parents say their children have heard a negative comment about their race; that's compared to 17 percent of white parents. Which helps explain why black parents are twice as likely to talk about race with their kids. It's a similar story in other categories.

Among parents of trans or nonbinary children, half reported their children hearing negative comments and were much more likely to talk about gender identity with their kids than were the parents of kids who'd heard no criticism. Also, 46 percent of Muslim parents and 28 percent of Jewish parents reported that their children had heard a negative comment about their religion. And it's clear from the results, this criticism is compelling many minority parents to have difficult conversations with their kids about identity that majority parents should also be having — but aren't.

"It's not the role or responsibility of a group of parents to be having those conversations," says Sesame's Haider. "It really is the responsibility of everyone."



LIFE KIT

WATCH: It's Hard To Delay Gratification. Just Ask Cookie Monster

In a separate survey, Sesame Workshop also queried preschool and elementary school educators about how they approach social identity in the classroom. Interestingly, teachers say they feel that social class — not race/ethnicity, gender, country of origin or any other social category — has the biggest impact on their students' ability to succeed, yet class is also the category they believe is least appropriate to discuss in school, and the one they're the least comfortable talking about with students.

Differences like class, skin color, gender and religion don't have to divide us, but ignoring them won't unite us either. Conversation is key, Sesame Workshop argues in this new report, to building your child's own positive sense of identity — along with a healthy respect for everyone else's.